Determinants of adolescents' ineffective and improved coping with cyberbullying: A Delphi study

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ABSTRACT

The study's aim was to obtain an overview of all relevant variables involved in ineffective coping behavior and improvement in coping behavior as it pertains to cyberbullying among adolescents, in order to systematically develop a theory- and evidence-based intervention. This was done by means of a three round online Delphi study. First, 20 key experts listed possible relevant determinants. Next, 70 experts scored these determinants on their relevance and finally, experts rerated relevance of each determinant based on group median scores. The experts agreed that 115 items are relevant for ineffective (62) or improvement in (53) coping behavior. New found determinants were the extent to which one can adjust behavior upon feedback, impulsivity, self-confidence, communication style, personality, decision-making skills, conflict resolution skills, previous participation in personal resilience training, social relationships, rumors and self-disclosure. We conclude that the Delphi technique is useful in discovering new and relevant determinants of behavior.

Worldwide, between 20% and 40% of adolescents report being the victim of cyberbullying (Tokunaga, 2010). This is especially the case with younger adolescents (12–15 years) in lower educational levels (Slonje & Smith, 2008; Vandebosch, Van Cleemput, Mortelmans, & Walrave, 2006; van der Vegt, den Blanken, & Jepma, 2007; Walrave & Heirman, 2011). Cyberbullying is defined as a repeated aggressive intentional act, carried out by a group or an individual, using electronic forms of contact (e.g. computers, cell phones). The act is repeated over time against a victim that cannot easily defend him or herself (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Huang & Chou, 2010; Smith et al., 2008). Being the victim of cyberbullying can result in severe health problems and poorer quality of life. Research has found that online victimization is associated with serious internalizing difficulties such as anxiety (Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler, & Kift, 2012), depression (Perren, Dooley, Shaw, & Cross, 2010; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004), emotional distress (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004) and suicidality (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012). Consequently, cyberbully victims more often have problems at school, drop out of school, experiment with drugs and alcohol, experience physical or sexual abuse and/or have displayed delinquent and aggressive behavior (Beran & Li, 2005, 2007; Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009; Lewinsohn, Hops, Roberts, Seeley, & Andrews, 1993; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Ybarra, 2004; Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006).

Several studies have shown that cyberbully victims are simultaneously traditional victims (Gradinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2009; Kowalski, Morgan, & Limber, 2012; Riebel, Jaeger, & Fischer, 2009; Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012; Smith

et al., 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004) and that the emotional impact of victimization is similar to the impact of indirect traditional bullying (e.g. spreading rumors, exclusion) (Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchán, Calmaestra, & Vega, 2009). Nevertheless, cyberbullying and traditional bullying also differ in various important aspects: (1) one single action online can have a huge impact, repetition – an aspect of traditional bullying – therefore is not necessary for cyberbullying (i.e. one action such as uploading a denigrating picture can result in prolonged and widespread humiliation (Dooley, Pyżalski, & Cross, 2009; Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010; Vandebosch & van Cleemput, 2009)); (2) it is not clear whether cyberbullying must be intentional: because non-verbal communication is lacking, the victim does not know whether the bullying event should be interpreted as intentional (Dehue, Bolman, & Völlink, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007)); (3) similarly, adolescents do not always realize the influence of their behavior in a place where they do not see the consequences of their behavior (i.e. online); (4) cyberbullying often is anonymous (Dempsey, Sulkowski, Dempsey, & Storch, 2011; Huang & Chou, 2010; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007), (5) therefore the power imbalance between the victim and the bully in terms of popularity, status, social competence and intelligence is not a requirement (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006); and (6) traditional bullying often is limited to school hours, while cyberbullying can happen everywhere and at any time (Dempsey et al., 2011; Dooley et al., 2009) without the supervision of adults (Dehue et al., 2008; Lee & Chae, 2007).

Given the established negative effects (Parris, Varjas, Meyers, & Cutts, 2012) and given the evidence that the negative effects of cyberbullying are impacted by the coping style used by victims (e.g., ineffective coping appears to yield depression- and health complaints) (Völlink, Bolman, Dehue, & Jacobs, 2013), it is essential to know how adolescents cope with cyberbullying and which factors determine coping with cyberbullying. Additionally, knowledge about coping with traditional bullying can, to some extent, be applied to cyberbullying (Riebel et al., 2009), because despite the differences, cyberbullying and traditional bullying (i.e. (cyber)bullying) also appear to have common characteristics. Coping can be defined as the cognitive and behavioral effort employed to reduce, master, or tolerate internal and external demands that are the consequence of stressful events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Reactions to the demands of a stressor (e.g. receiving a hurtful e-mail) often are categorized as problem-focused or emotion-focused (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Alternative delineations include internal versus external coping (Bijttebier & Vertommen, 1998), approach versus avoidance coping (Roth & Cohen, 1986) and aggressive versus passive coping (Mahady Wilton, Craig, & Pepler, 2000).

Coping with (cyber)bullying

With traditional bullying, most individuals who had never been bullied reported using problem-focused strategies, such as confronting (Paul, Smith, & Blumberg, 2012) and seeking social support to cope with daily problems (Kanetsuna, Smith, & Morita, 2006). Most individuals who had been bullied reported using ineffective emotion-focused strategies (Craig, Pepler, & Blais, 2007), such as wishful thinking and avoidance coping (Hunter & Boyle, 2004): victims tended to use passive coping strategies, while bully/victims (both bullies and victims) were more likely to use aggressive coping strategies (Bijttebier & Vertommen, 1998; Kristensen & Smith, 2003; Mahady Wilton et al., 2000).

Several studies have delineated the coping responses used by cyberbully victims. Problem-focused coping strategies – acting on the environment or oneself to change the problem that causes distress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985) – reported include removing oneself from the particular website where one has been bullied, staying offline for a given period of time, and informing a teacher or another adult (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). These and other problem-focused strategies all appear to be effective in coping with cyberbullying. Other coping strategies reported include bullying the bully, deleting messages or pretending to ignore the bullying (Dehue et al., 2008). These strategies, as well other emotion-focused strategies (i.e. regulating distressing emotions (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985)) such as aggressive and passive reactions (Mahady Wilton et al., 2000), alcohol (Nansel et al., 2001) or drug use, appear to be ineffective in coping with cyberbullying. The use of ineffective coping strategies appears to maintain online and offline victimization (Andreou, 2001; Bijttebier & Vertommen, 1998; Craig et al., 2007; Hunter & Boyle, 2004; Kristensen & Smith, 2003; Mahady Wilton et al., 2000; Perry, Hodges, Egan, Juvonen, & Graham, 2001; Skrzypiec, Slee, Murray-Harvey, & Pereira, 2011).

To reduce victimization of cyberbullying and its negative effects, bullied adolescents thus need to improve their current coping strategies. They need to employ effective coping strategies that not only help them to mentally deal with (cyber) bullying but also contribute to the prevention and discontinuation of (cyber)bullying (Jacobs, Völlink, Dehue, & Lechner, submitted for publication). Especially during adolescents' transfer to (junior) high school, they have an open mind and are eager to learn new skills that enable them to learn how to cope more effectively with problems such as the negative effects of cyberbullying (Faber, Verkerk, van Aken, Lissenburg, & Geerlings, 2006). Furthermore, cyberbullying and victimization seems to peak in this period (Wade & Beran, 2011), for example because young adolescents' self-esteem is low and unstable (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973), self-consciousness is high (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009), and the interaction with peers is highly valued and new social networks are formed (Gavin & Furman, 1989).

Equipping potential and actual cyberbully victims with effective coping strategies requires interventions that are rooted in both theory and evidence. The Intervention Mapping (IM) protocol is a six-step framework that provides clear guidelines on how to systematically develop such interventions (Bartholomew, Parcel, Kok, Gottlieb, & Fernández, 2011). IM emphasizes that systematic intervention development should be based on a thorough understanding of the problem behavior and especially of the determinants related to this behavior. We use the IM protocol to systematically develop an online tailored advice for adolescent cyberbully victims attending lower educational levels (Jacobs et al., 2014). With the online tailored advice adolescents will learn how to cope more effectively with cyberbullying and its negative effects.